

SKIPPACK STONE ARCH BRIDGE
Spanning Skippack Creek
at Germantown Pike
Evansburg State Park
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-311
HAER No. PA 311

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: Germantown Pike over Skippack Creek, Evansburg State Park, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The 1792 stone-arch Skippack Bridge is one of the oldest bridges in continuous use in the United States and possibly the oldest to have retained its original dimensions. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Description: Skippack Creek is a shallow, slow-moving stream which flows south past the Germantown Pike. Trees cover on the gentle slopes to either side of the site. A recently restored mill stands north of the bridge on the western bank, and its tailrace rejoins the creek near the western piers.

Eight semi-circular arches, each approximately 20' at the spring line, carry Skippack Bridge across the creek. The bridge is 267' long and 24' wide, with the top of the coping approximately 21' feet above the waterline. Both approaches slope down towards the center of the bridge, though the roadway itself is flat. The arches and spandrels are recessed six inches from the parapet and wing walls.

The bridge contains several types of masonry: Large stones make up the piers. The cut sandstone voussoirs are the only part of the original arches still visible; over the past two decades sections of the rubble stone intrados have been strengthened with injections of gunnite, and in 1992 all remaining exposed sections were covered. Wing and parapet walls are generally made from the original, albeit often repointed, rubble stone. The eastern section of north wall collapsed, however, and in 1992 was rebuilt with new, darker stone. The original capstones were probably slate, but topping the walls presently are precast concrete blocks with flat arches. The bridge carries two lanes of vehicle traffic (no pedestrian walkway). Below the grooved concrete roadway is a 12" reinforced concrete slab installed during the 1992 renovations. Datestones at the centers of the north and south walls, respectively, commemorate the bridge's original construction in 1792 and an 1874 rebuilding. On the eastern half of the north wall is a metal plaque which marks the recent rehabilitation.

History: Attempts to build a bridge to connect the eastern and western parts of Montgomery County began in 1762, when Montgomery was still part of Philadelphia County. Supporters of the project used the common technique of a lottery to raise some of the necessary funds, but evidence from 1792 suggests that money was stolen. That year a six-man jury attempted to find a site for a bridge over Skippack Creek which would serve both Germantown Pike (then called Manatawny Road) and the Old Baptist Church Road.

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Unable to find such a location, the jury recommended the present site. Masons Stephen Lane, John Alman, and John Burke began construction in June, and the bridge opened that November.¹

The completion of the bridge and the turnpiking of the Manatawny Road in 1804 helped spur growth in the surrounding area. Illustrating the growth of traffic along Germantown Pike, as it was now called, was the construction of two new traveller's inns during the first years of the 19th century. These joined the 1792 Peter Williams Tavern, which was located at the eastern end of the bridge and appears to have served as the site for planning the bridge. The area also became the center of the Funkites, former Mennonites expelled from the church for supporting the Revolutionary War. Their cemetery lies just southwest of the bridge. By 1835 a grist and plaster mill, known as Keyser Mill, after one of its later owners, had been built on the west bank.²

Records of the bridge gradually became more complete over the years. In 1874 county commissioners hired Ezekiel Houpt to repair the bridge, at a price that suggests little work had been done during the previous eight decades. There is no description of the work he did, however. County records resume in 1916. Over the next twenty-five years workmen undertook small repairs to the bridge, most often repointing sections of the wall. Major reconstruction took place during 1942-43, when the arches were strengthened and the north wall relaid.

In the last ten years there have been two major projects.³ During 1988 the wings walls, parapets, and coping were rebuilt in an attempt to recapture the historical appearance. The bridge was closed for nearly a year during 1992-93 for a substantial reconstruction. There were a number of changes besides the visible repairs to the arches, walls, and roadway: new gravel

¹ "Skipack Creek Bridge, One of the Oldest Spans in Montgomery County, Undergoing Extensive Important Repairs on Its 150th Anniversary," Norristown Times Herald, September 1942; Eva Boswell, "National Register Nomination Form," 2 July 1970.

² A Bicentennial History of Lower Providence Township (Phoenixville: n.p., 1976), 11; Margaret Hocker Hoover, Concerning Collegeville: A History of that Community and Somewhat of Its Neighbor--Trappe (Chestnut Hill, PA: n.p., 1966), Chapter 2.

³ "Bridge No. 142," Montgomery County Bridges (n.p., 1916), Montgomery County Department of Roads and Bridges, Norristown; "Skipack Creek Bridge..."; "Skipack Creek Bridge Contract Awarded," Montco Observer, 16 March 1988.

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backfill replaced the old slate fill, which had turned to mud; an improved drainage system was added under the roadbed; and two piers whose substructure had been scoured by the stream were repointed. The bridge reopened to traffic October 2, 1992.⁴

The bridge and the surrounding area became part of a newly-created state park in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1972 the bridge and thirteen surrounding structures, including Keyser's Mill, the three inns, and the Funkite Cemetery, became part of an Historic District. More recently, the mill and the cemetery have been refurbished.⁵

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⁴ Interview with Peter Ressler, Sanders and Thomas, Pottstown, PA., 28 July 1994; Interview with Larry Meitzler, Nyleve Construction Co., Emmaus, PA, 2 August 1994; "Bridge 142," Inspection Records, Montgomery County Department of Roads and Bridges, Norristown. "Skipack Creek Bridge...", Norristown Times-Herald, September 1992; "Bridge No. 142," Montgomery County Bridges (n.p., 1916), Montgomery County Department of Roads and Bridges, Norristown.

⁵ Eileen A. McCaffrey, "Old Mill Gets New Lease on Life," Norristown Times Herald; Rich Henson, "As state and neighbors spat, a park just sits," Philadelphia Inquirer, March 1994, p. b1; Harvey Freedenberg and John M. Sausman, "Evansburg Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, July 1971.

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